

J. Gordon Harris (2008). *Biblical Perspectives on Ageing: God and the Elderly* (second edition). New York: Harworth Press, 199 pp. ISBN 978 0 78903 538 7 (hardbound)

Peter G. Coleman (2011). *Belief and Ageing: Spiritual Pathways in Later Life*. Padstow: Policy Press, 181 pp. ISBN 978 1 84742 459 4 (paperback)

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While spirituality has historically been associated with adult ageing, as part of the wisdom games that we are encouraged to engage in in later life, it is perhaps surprising that so little has been written about it. In some ways, this reflects a secularist bias in the academy and parallels a continuing migration away from organised Christianity, mostly in Europe. Among social gerontologists, a few names stand out. Elizabeth MacKinlay (2012) has been a tireless advocate of the importance of spirituality both in the everyday experience of a long life, as also with specific reference to the care of dementia sufferers and the significance of deep old age. John Swinton (2010) has made a powerful critique of the position of dementia

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in society, based on spiritual understanding. Lars Tornstam (2003) has introduced the world to the notion of "gerotranscendence," which stands as an important counterweight to the materialist and productivist turn in mainstream social gerontology. Here, we are asked to celebrate the value of the big picture, thinking that it may be one of the hidden virtues of adult ageing and also the fascinating concept of "positive solitude," which is very different from social isolation. It lays the foundation for a powerful critique of "busy bodies," which Stephen Katz (2000) among others has identified as arising from 19th Century Protestantism, as the bumper-sticker "Jesus is coming – look busy" has made a gerontological debut for those who now believe that work is the principal means of social recognition for older adults. Euan Sadler is perhaps a member of a new generation exploring the significance of spirituality as a basis for an alternative notion of success in ageing.

So, two books examining the relationship between adult ageing and belief are particularly welcome, at a time when age-based identities are again in flux and a door opens to multiple ways of valuing the experience of a long life. The books are very different. The first, J. Gordon Harris' "Biblical perspectives on ageing" takes a theological approach and is rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition of the Old and New Testaments. However, little reference is made to Islam, the third Abrahamic tradition. This book sits somewhere between the traditional divide in faith studies, between religiosity and spirituality, but its main function is to place statements about old age and a long life in the context of the historical periods and cultures from which they arise to clarify their meaning and purpose. Peter Coleman's book, consisting of a number of individual and co-authored chapters, is broader in scope. It takes what could loosely be called a psycho-social perspective towards the question of belief in later life and draws on a number of perspectives, including Humanism, European diversity in Christianity, and wider belief systems, such as Hinduism, Sikhism and Islam. If I were to identify a common thread throughout these chapters, it would be something to do with the diversity of belief and the positions taken with respect to ageing, tempered by the common benefits that belief can have as older people negotiate their lives.

Harris is primarily an Old Testament scholar and many of his examples are taken from there. God is seen to be an agent of blessing, as a protector

of social structures and a proponent of justice. God sides with fragile minorities and is the deliverer of the weak. A strong religious base to society is therefore seen as a means of protecting older adults from exploitation and abuse. However, there is no systematic theology of ageing identified in the texts themselves, and the reader has to work it out for themselves. However, what comes through is quite surprising. The old in the Old Testament are by no means uniformly wise. And, wisdom is not necessarily associated with a long life. Rather, some people exhibit wisdom, and sometimes this is associated with experience. It is closer to what one might call practical intelligence. Older adults sometimes are identified by their foolishness or depravity (Eli in Samuel, Noah in old age, Lott). Elders become physically disabled, intransigent, unable to enjoy sexual experiences and ... senile. Some books are structured as advice to younger generations (Ecclesiastes) and only sometimes portray older adults as role models in themselves (mostly Moses). And, these older adults are almost always men, although wisdom in itself is personified as female. In summary, wisdom is dependent on piety, rather than piety being the outcome of lived experience.

According to Harris, the Old Testament is where to look if you want cultural or specific role examples for understanding old age. The New Testament, partly because Christ died in his early thirties, and the millennialism of the first believers (i.e. the end times were almost upon us, so a long life was less of a problem ...), has fewer examples. However, as one travels from the Gospels, through Acts and on to the letters of Paul, the early church became much more concerned with how to live as a community over time, with younger and older members who need mutual support and new rules to live by. One example of this change can be seen in Christ's relative suspicion of family ties that could get in the way of pursuit of the kingdom. However, by the time we get to Paul, family becomes a more common metaphor for the new Christian communities, as the need to make provision for widows and widowers and find a place for the surviving first generation of believers become a more pressing concern.

Harris' book, which has been re-written, and judging from the (undated) preface to the first edition, is an easier read than last time around. For gerontologists, the language is sometimes less than politically correct – "the elderly" feature rather a lot – and apart from a nod towards

demographic change, it does not really engage with contemporary social issues or theoretical understandings. However, for the reader who wants to ground his or her understanding of ageing in a Biblical setting, it is an excellent introduction.

Peter Coleman's book, "Belief and Ageing", includes single authored chapters and those written with others. The authors principally address the role of belief from a UK perspective, with specific chapters on European and domestic diversity. Coleman gets around the question of spirituality versus religiosity, by focussing on belief – without which "life is unimaginable" (1). His writing is thereby freed of having to justify whether experience or institutional practice is its principal focus, and in doing so, he draws on a lifetime of empirical study, collaboration and critical reflection. The book can be seen as a response to at least two questions: Does becoming spiritually aware take time? And does the quality of belief and awareness vary across the lifecourse? Important issues are raised throughout, including the degree to which beliefs are life sustaining and whether they help people endure hardship and the pursuit of life goals. Given that the subject matter is both personally subjective and transcendent, it is perhaps unsurprising to discover early on that "Collecting information on people's use of belief is not straightforward. It is probably one of the most difficult areas of experience for people to articulate adequately what they think and feel" (7).

Following an introductory chapter, Coleman examines the changing social context of belief in later life covering generational differences in the strength of religious affiliation, the relative decrease in the belief in a personal God and the growth of non-institutional forms of spiritual belief. With Mills and Speck, Coleman then examines methodological questions around listening to and enabling the disclosure of beliefs and values in later life. Three case studies are examined in detail. In Chapter four, with Mills and Spreadbury, Coleman studies the role of stability and change in spiritual belief across the lifespan and in later life itself. Belief it appears can either increase or decrease as individuals become more aware of life's limitations and finitude, with disillusion becoming more closely associated with institutional systems rather than the idea of divinity itself. Rather than suggesting that spiritual experience intensifies, it appears that there is a growing clarification of views about belief as people grow older.

The related topic, the role of religion in coping with bereavement, is examined by Spreadbury and Coleman, and the concept of spiritual capital is introduced. There then follow three chapters on humanist belief (with Wlikinson), European diversity – with specific reference to evangelical growth following the fall of communism, the historical role of resistance and the vital degree of witness to the action of the Holy Spirit in people's lives (with Gianelli, Mills and Petrov) and religious difference and age in a multi-faith Britain (with Begum and Jaleel). Each of these areas, though the relation to spiritual as compared to religious experience is varied, points to a sustained and in some cases growing importance of belief across the life course. Throughout, there are important indications on the positive relationship between belief, health and well-being, although in some cultural contexts the interpretation of age, illness, particularly mental illness and divine will are complex and potentially antagonistic.

Coleman finishes with a sustained reflection on ageing and the future of belief. He identifies the often antagonistic relationship between the UK's secular culture and religious conviction, one consequence of which is that "religious knowledge within the UK has sunk to appalling levels" and a paradoxical situation in which "increasing salience but declining comprehension of religion" (157) co-exist. Themes, such as baby boomer interest in non-institutional spirituality, the increasing recognition of hospital chaplaincy as an important site for the expression and value of belief, and the salience of questions around meaning and purpose in an aggressively materialist and consumerist environment, are dealt with sensitivity and with conviction.

Both of these books would be a valuable addition to the scholarly library and to the collections of the interested gerontologists and non-gerontologists alike. One outlines textual source material that can be used to locate adult ageing, the other provides a contemporary context that is rich in its diversity and in the questions it raises for the human condition. Both in their different ways identify a route map by which to interpret the challenges of a long life. I was left with the feeling that a serious consideration of the role of belief, and in particular spiritual belief, has the potential to become a truly subversive discourse in our cultural adaptation to an ageing society.

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